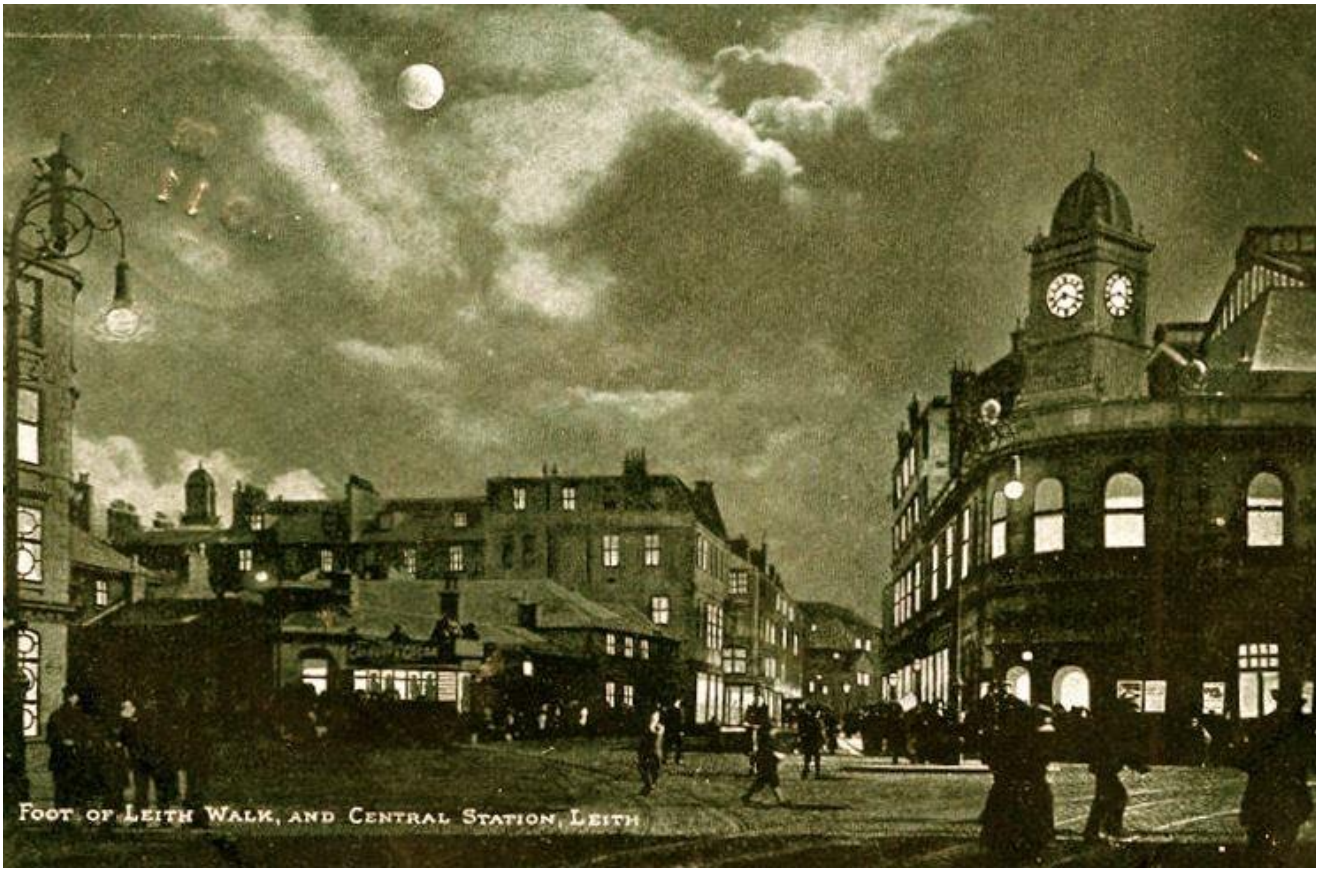
THE GENEALOGICAL HISTORY OF A LEITH FAMILY



Isabella Wilkie Rose Shiels



A short history of the ancestors of Isabella (Ella) Shiels dating back to 1798

This document traces Isabella's ancestors on her father's side, the family Shiels

James Shiels 1804-1884

Father of James Shiels of Ratho. Employed as a ploughman, he was born in Linlithgow in 1804 to James Shiels of Linlithgow parish (1767-1858) and Jean Meikle from Ecclesmachan (1777-1841). James always stated on official documents that he was born in Bathgate around 1801. He was in fact mistaken: the family moved to the Bathgate area when James was about 4 or 5 years old. His parents lived and worked on Craigmailling Farm, a mile or so east of Torphichen village. The name "Shiels" had a few variations – Shields, Sheils, Shiells, etc – and a search for the birth of James Shiels, using all spelling variations, throughout the whole of West Lothian in the late 18th and early 19th centuries produces only one James born at this time.

James married Janet Chapman in the summer of 1822 in the parish of Uphall, and moved to the parish of Ratho where they lived in the 1840s and 1850s, living in a cottage called "Nellfield" (now demolished and rebuilt), on what is now Clifton Road at Newbridge. Janet died in 1864, after they'd moved to a farm steading called Myre, about a mile north of Winchburgh. James then moved into Edinburgh and in 1868 married a laundress (later a charwoman) called Helen King. Helen was a widow, and 20 years younger than James. He lived to be 80 (very old for someone born in the early 19th century) and died of "debility and age" in 11 Veitch's Square in Stockbridge. This is off Haugh Street and has been demolished and rebuilt since James lived there.



Torphichen Preceptory. This was the parish church where the Shiels family baptisms. marriages and burials took place from the 18th century, and probably earlier.



Ecclesmachan, about a mile or so north of Uphall. The Meikle family lived here in the 18th century.



Uphall Parish Church.
James Shiels and Janet Chapman married here in 1822

James Shiels in the 1871 census. An error has been made regarding his age. James was born in 1804 and was 67 in 1871

Name:	**James Shiels**
Age:	**78**
Estimated Birth Year:	**abt 1793**
Relationship:	**Head**
Spouse's name :	**Helen Shiels**
Gender:	**Male**
Where born:	**Linlithgowshire**
Registration Number:	**685/1**
Registration district:	**St George**
Civil Parish:	**Edinburgh St Cuthberts**
County:	**Midlothian**
Address:	**11 Veitch's Square**
Occupation:	**Previously labourer**
ED:	**88**
Household schedule	**78**
LINE:	**19**
Roll:	**CSSCT1871_157**
Household Members:	**Name** **Age** **James Shiels** **78** **Helen Shiels** **49**



Stockbridge in the late 19th century as James Shiels would have known it. His house at Veitch's Square is just behind the building marked by the red cross.



19th-century Stockbridge, from Raeburn Place. The small opening on the left behind the lamp-post leads to James Shiels' house in Veitch's Square.

Janet Chapman 1800-1864

Mother of James Shiels of Ratho. Janet was born in 1800 in Dalmeny, outside South Queensferry. Her father was Mungo Chapman, a carter from Abercorn. Her mother, Agnes McKinlay, lived to the age of 84 and died in 1863.

Parish records show that the Chapmans had migrated from Bathgate to Dalmeny via Abercorn, a small hamlet west of Hopetoun House, between 1750 and 1780.

As an adult, Janet appears to have spent some time in Abercorn, about 3 miles from where she was born, since this is given as her place of residence on her marriage record when she wed James Shiels at Uphall in 1822. When Janet died in Myre, a farm steading north of Winchburgh, in 1864, she had only outlived by a year her mother Agnes who had been residing with her.



Dalmeny Village



Main Street, Uphall, mid-19th Century

John Collins 1796-1882

Father of Agness Collins. John was born in Corstorphine; his pareants and grandparents hailed from Dalmeny on his father's side and Corstorphine on his mother's. At John's birth his father was 44 years old.

In the 1830s John worked as a ploughman, at Baberton Mains in the Currie parish area of Edinburgh. Baberton Mains steading is now private housing in Baberton Road, off Westburn Avenue. The property has been fully restored and retains most of its original stonework. By 1842 John had moved with his family to the village of Bonnington, a mile south of Ratho.

John was the first of the family to live in Baberton, so he possibly moved there to take up his job on the farm. John appeared to move about to follow the work, since he is recorded on census records as follows:

1851 New Mills, Currie
1861 Dreghorn Farm
1871 Old Farm Lane, Colinton

John was married three times in his life: first to Katherine Peden, then Isobel Reid (in 1824) and finally Margaret West. When he died at the age of 86 in 1882, he was still employed as a ploughman and was living in Middle Norton, a small hamlet on the Edinburgh-Glasgow Road, opposite what became the Ingliston Highland Showground. His death certificate stated that he died of "old age".



Baberton Mains
1818



Aerial view of Baberton Mains steading where John Collins and family lived and worked. Census records show that a number of families were packed in here, to the extent that some of the workers even took lodgings in the lofts.



One of the cottages at Baberton Mains. The buildings have been fully restored and looked much the same when John Collins and his family lived here in the 1820s.

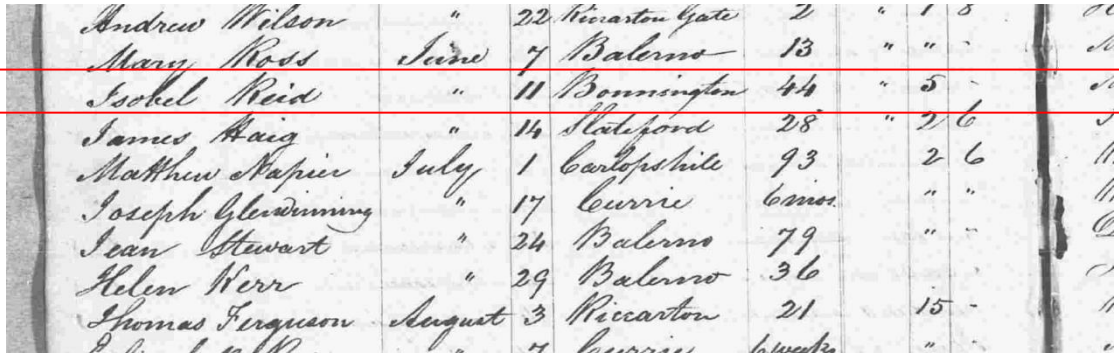
Isobel Reid 1798-1842

Mother of Agness Collins. The Reid family are recorded as having lived in the parish of Currie since the early 18th century. The parish area covered Currie, Juniper Green, Baberton and Balerno.

Isobel married John Collins in Currie in 1824, and they resided at Baberton Mains farm in the parish of Currie, where Agness was born in 1827. A brother, David, was born four years later but died at the age of 10, and the family were still living at the steading in 1841, along with the families of a number of agricultural workers. Isobel died at the young age of 44, but the cause of her death was not recorded in the parish record.



Currie Parish Kirk in winter



Andrew Wilson	"	22	Riccarton Gate	2	"	1	8	
Mary Ross	June	7	Balerno	13	"	"	-	
Isobel Reid	"	11	Bonnington	44	"	5	-	
James Haig	"	14	Slateford	28	"	2	6	
Matthew Napier	July	1	Carlopshile	93		2	6	
Joseph Glendinning	"	17	Currie	6 mos.		"	"	
Jean Stewart	"	24	Balerno	79		"	"	
Helen Kerr	"	29	Balerno	36				
Thomas Ferguson	August	3	Riccarton	21		15	-	

Extract from Currie Parish Kirk in 1842 recording Isobel Reid's death at the age of 44. She was recorded under her maiden name rather than her married name of Collins. Parish ministers varied in their recording practices.

James Shiels 1828-1897

Father of Alexander Shiels (1868-1947). Born in the parish of Ratho. By the age of 13, James was working as a servant in Bell's Mill (now demolished), about half-a-mile south of Winchburgh on the Niddry Road. He married Agness Collins of Currie in 1846 in the parish of Kirkliston and became a stone quarrier. The couple moved to the Ratho area and stayed there for almost a decade. Their address is given in the 1851 census as "Valleys Of Bonnington": this is a transcription error and refers to the village of Bonnington, a mile to the south-west of Ratho. James and family then moved (around 1854) to Muirburn Cottage, about 2 miles south of Kirkliston. This cottage was on the north-east corner of what is now the junction of Claylands Road and Cliftonhall Road at Newbridge: it has been demolished and where it stood adjoins what is now the car park of a small industrial estate. The original garden wall of the cottage still exists. While resident at Muirburn, the couple had eight children. Around 1865, they moved to Leith (2 Archibald Place, which later became 18 West Bowling Green Street) where three more children, including Alexander, were born.

By the 1890s, James - despite his age - was registered as still working as a stone dresser. He had "debility of heart" and had been suffering from chronic Bright's Disease for more than three years, until his death at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh in 1897.



Baird Street, Ratho, looking from the canal bridge towards the Main Street.



Ratho Main Street, looking west.



Kirkliston Parish Church



Muirburn Cottage 1855



South Leith, late 19th Century: West Bowling Green Street top centre

GH AND LEITH *SIB*

Shiels, Robert, & Son, wholesale confectioners, 174 Causewayside
Shiels, William, & Co., wine merchants, 134 and 136 Constitution st.; Telephone, 406
Shiels, Alex., sewing-machine and cycle agent, 2 and 8 W. Crosscauseway; ho. 7 Crichton st.
Shiels, Daniel, 21 Hawthornbank terrace
Shiels, Henry, 166 Montgomery street
Shiels, James, 4 Portland terrace
Shiels, James, 10 Rankeillor street
Shiels, James, 18 West Bowling-green street
Shiels, James, grocer and wine merchant, 6 Lord Russell place
Shiels, John, 34 West Norton place
Shiels, Sidey, wine merchant, 136 and 134 Constitution street; house, 74 Thirlestane road
Shiels, W. K., 11 Oakville terrace
Shiels, Mrs H., 22 Buccleuch street
Shiels, Mrs, 3 Henderson row
Shiels, Mrs, 8 St Catherine's place

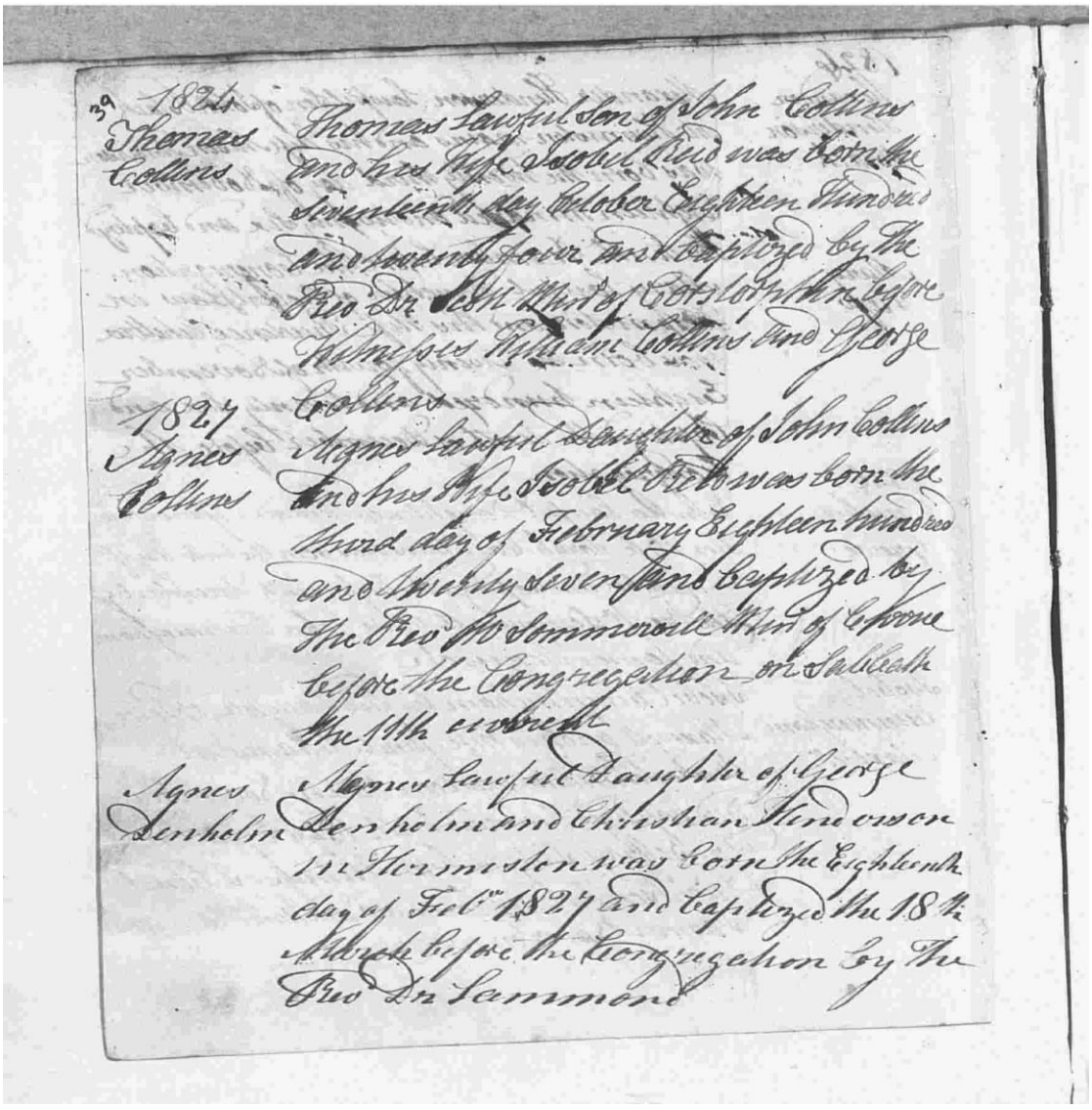
Despite being a manual labourer, James Shiels appeared to be able to afford an entry into the 1894 Post Office Directory

Agness Collins 1827-1894

Mother of Alexander Shiels (1868-1947). Agness was born in the parish of Currie and brought up on Baberton Mains Farm (now private housing in Baberton Road, to the south of the Edinburgh City Bypass). She moved, after marrying James Shiels in 1846, to the Ratho and Kirkliston areas, then to Leith. Agness had a total of 11 children, the last one at the age of 45. She died at 18 West Bowling Green Street, of rheumatic fever after falling into a coma at the age of 67. On her death certificate, the informant - her son David - noted Agness' mother's name as "Isabella Stoddart" which is an error, since Agness' birth record clearly states that her mother was Isobel Reid. However, the 1841 census shows an Isabella Stoddart from Currie, living in Hermiston and born in 1781, so she may have been a great aunt or in some way related which made David believe she was Agness' mother.

11/02/1827 COLLINS, AGNES (O.P.R. Births 682/00 0040 0081 CURRIE)

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Agness Collins' birth entry, from Currie Parish Church records.



Currie Village: as this old photograph shows, the original village was built around both sides of the river, later expanding uphill onto the Lanark Road.



Kirkliston Parish Church. Agness Collins and James Shiels married here in 1846.



Photo of Agness Collins taken at 18 West Bowling Green Street, Leith, probably in the 1880s. Agness is wearing a mourning brooch, popular among ordinary people in the late Victorian era after a bereavement. Her son Robert had died in 1884 of bronchitis and TB at the age of 18, so it is probably he who is being commemorated by the brooch.

David Brown Low 1823-1887

Father of Jane Grant Low. David was brought up in Coal Hill, at the foot of Sheriff Brae. He received his middle name from his mother Janet Brown; his father, William Low, worked as a porter

David first married at the age of around 27. He and his first wife, Mary Crawford Temple, moved into 15 Water Lane in Leith (now Water Street) and had two children. By the early 1860s they had two children and had moved to 4 Vinegar Close, but Mary died in 1865, leaving David to bring up the children.

David married his second wife Jane Grant Fraser in 1867 at her parents' house, 9 Greenside Place, Edinburgh. At this time he was employed as an engine driver in a factory. He was 20 years older than his new wife. After marriage, Jane moved from 31 Giles Street into Vinegar Close with David, where their daughter, Jane Grant Low was born in 1867. After Jane's death the following month, David re-married in July 1868, his new wife being Annie Scott. They moved into 6 View Place (this was between Glover Street and Easter Road: it was eventually demolished to make way for Leith Central Station). A few years later they moved to 10 Breadalbane Street in Leith. David was employed in the 1880s as a flour mill labourer. Like many working-class people of his generation he was illiterate, as shown on his wife Jane's death certificate where he signed "his mark" with a cross.

David died in 1887 of "apoplexy", at home in Breadalbane Street.

Historical note

Vinegar Close was a narrow lane running between Yardheads and Giles Street. It was demolished along with a number of other closes when Henderson Street was built in the 1880s. What was once the southern half of the close is now a small triangular park facing Yardheads, the northern section having become the south-east side of Henderson Street leading to The Vaults.



Vinegar Close, late 19th Century: demolished in the 1880s as part of the "Leith Improvement Act". Giles Street is at top right of photo, Yardheads at bottom left.



Vinegar Close photographed in 1870, trhee years after Jane Fraser died here at the age of 24.



Coal Hill, Leith, photographed in 1855, as David Brown Low knew it.



Water Street, from Burgess Street (right) to Tolbooth Wynd. David Low lived here in the 1850s when it was called Water Lane. His house was in the block at the left edge of the picture. All these buildings were demolished in 1915.



Rear view of tenements at Greenside Place, Edinburgh. David Low married Jane Fraser at her parents' house, number 9 (marked with red cross). These buildings became slums which were demolished in the 1970s: the Omni Centre was built on the site in the 1990s.



Leith Kirkgate, late 19th Century

Jane Fraser 1844-1867

Mother of Jane Grant Low. Jane Fraser's parents were John Fraser, a shoemaker who had been born in Kiltarlity, Invernesshire, and Jane (or Jean) Grant from Wick in Caithness. The couple were still living in High Street, Wick, when Jane was born, but had moved to Edinburgh by the mid-1850s, when they resided first at Plainstane's Close in the Canongate (now demolished and incorporated into Chessel's Court) then at 9 Greenside Place. At this time, young Jane was 17 years old, and was working as a shoe binder for her father. Jane's mother died in 1872: her father then re-married at the age of nearly 60. By this time he had moved a couple of doors along, to 13 Greenside Place (see Historical Note); he died there in 1882 of "inflammation of bowels".

Before marrying David Brown Low in April 1867, Jane was living at 31 Giles Street in Leith, and moved after marriage around the corner to live with him in 4 Vinegar Close. At this point, she was two months pregnant with daughter Jane, who was born in November. A month after her daughter's birth, Jane Fraser died in 4 Vinegar Close at the age of 23, of "acute phthisis" – a disease now known as pulmonary tuberculosis. She had been suffering this for over a month, even before her daughter was born. Jane's father outlived her by 15 years, and died of a bowel disorder at 13 Greenside Place. Jane was buried in Rosebank Cemetery, Pilrig Street, in common grave C-277.

Historical Note: The housing in Greenside Place and its continuation in Leith Street deteriorated throughout the late 19th and early 20th century until it had to be demolished in the early 1970s. It lay vacant until the late 1990s when the Omni Leisure Centre was built on it.



Greenside Place as the Frasers would have known it. Jane's father died in one of the houses at number 13, which can just be seen at the right of the picture.



Giles Street, late 19th Century

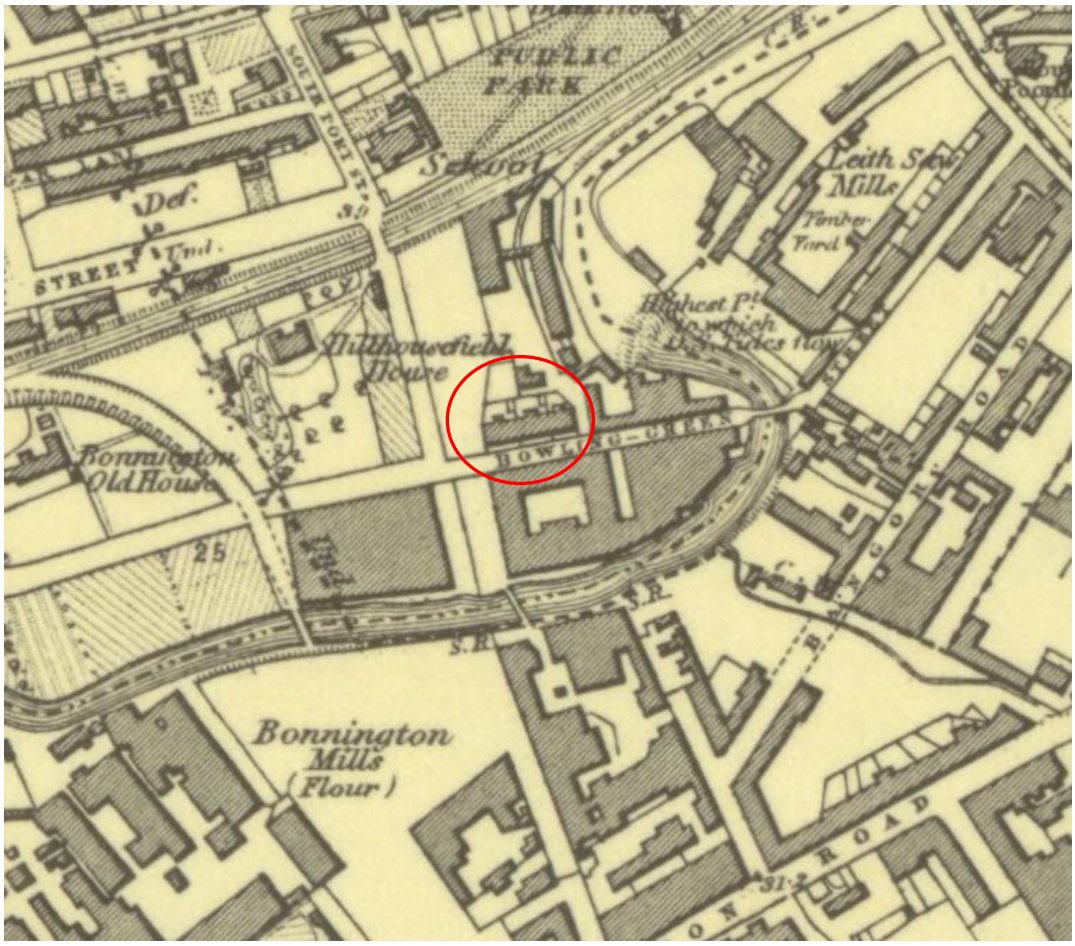


The junction of Cables Wynd and Giles Street. This end of Giles Street has been demolished, along with all the closes leading off it.

Alexander Shiels 1868-1947

Father of Alexander Shiels (1895-1973). Born at 2 Archibald Place in Leith (later re-numbered to 18 West Bowling Green Street) where his parents had moved to in the mid 1860s. He married Jane Grant Low in 1889 while employed as a shipyard labourer. The couple lived first at 2 Bridge Street, Leith (now Sandport Place) then at 33 Trafalgar Lane, until about 1894, when they moved along the street to number 39. Alexander worked first as a shipyard labourer at Leith Docks then became a sawmill labourer. He and his family moved into his father's house at 18 West Bowling Green Street, probably after the death of his father in 1897.

Around 1905 the family moved into 3 Tennant Street. This was to remain the Shiels family home until 1965. It was demolished in the 1970s to make way for industrial units. Alexander lived long enough to retire from the sawmill and died in Tennant Street at the age of 78 from a cerebral haemorrhage.



The red circle shows 1,2 and 3 Archibald Place, later re-numbered to 16, 18 and 20 West Bowling Green Street. The dead-end street at the bottom right of the map is Tennant Street, newly built and not yet linked via Jane Street to Leith Walk.



The original Bonnington Toll, looking down Bonnington Road from Pilrig Street.The toll house was demolished to make way for the railway at the end of the 19th century.



Leith Mills: West Bowling Green Street is just out of picture at top left



This photo of Bridge Street (later re-named Sandport Place) was taken in the 1960s when the street had deteriorated into a slum. Alexander Shiels and Jane Grant Low lived at number 2 (marked with a red "X") where their eldest daughter Annie was born in 1890. This side of the street was demolished in the 1970s and replaced with industrial units.

The bridge at the left of the photo leads to Coalhill where Jane's father David Brown Low had been born.

Shown here in the 1960s is the rear of numbers 1 to 3 Bridge Street. Close inspection shows clothes pulleys attached to the windows, a common device in tenements for drying washing.





This is the earliest known picture of any member of the Shiels family. Jessie Johnston (born Jessie Shiels) was the cousin of Alexander Shiels (1868-1947). She died at the age of 45 of "acute delirious mania" in the Rosslynlee asylum in Midlothian. This picture was taken between 1901 and 1905 in the asylum grounds.



Leith photographed in 1929 looking north. The dominant feature is the Central Railway Station. Easter Road is at the bottom right of the picture. The tenements in the foreground beside te station, comprising Gordon Street, Glover Street and Ferrier Street were all demolished in the 1970s, having degenerated into slums.

Jane Grant Low 1867-1912

Mother of Alexander Shiels (1895-1973). Born at 4 Vinegar Close, off Giles Street. Jane's mother having died a month after she was born, Jane was brought up by her grandparents at 9 Greenside Place. By the time she was 14, Jane was living in the house of her father's cousin George Brown Latimer, and working as a domestic servant. George was a watchmaker who lived in a Georgian house at 9 Brougham Street in Tollcross. This was a sizeable household with George, his wife Christina, four of his grown-up children, two grandchildren and a lodger. His business was based at Orchardfield Place (now Bread Street) later moving to 143-147 Lothian Road.

Despite living in Tollcross, Jane appears to have retained connections with Leith: she married Alexander Shiels in 1889 at 87 Bonnington Road (See Historical Note below). This was the address to which her stepmother Annie Scott had moved after Jane's father, David Low, died in 1887. Jane and Alexander moved first into 33, then into 39 Trafalgar Lane, Leith, where the first three of their six children were born. They subsequently moved to 18 West Bowling Green Street, then to 3 Tennant Street where Jane died of cancer in 1912.

Historical Note

87 Bonnington Road was part of the tenement block which included 3 Tennant Street. It went as far as the lane opposite Burlington Street. It was known locally as The Bowery due to the large Bowershall Engine Works behind it.



St Anthony's Lane, leading to Giles Street. In the distance is the warren of low-quality housing where Jane Grant's mother and many like her died of TB.



Brougham Street from The Meadows, looking towards Tollcross. Jane Low was in domestic service at number 9, in the distance on the left.



Tollcross, with High Riggs on the left and Lauriston Place on the right. This photo was taken two decades after Jane had left Brougham Street and returned to Leith, but apart from the tram lines, this is how Jane would have known Tollcross.



Foot of Leith Walk, early 20th Century. This view would have been familiar to Jane.

Alexander Shiels 1895-1973

Father of Isabella Shiels. Born at 39 Trafalgar Lane, Leith. The family moved into 18 West Bowling Green Street before Alexander started school (probably around 1897 after the death of his grandfather James who had occupied the property). By the time his mother died in 1912, the family were living at 3 Tennant Street.

Alexander joined the army shortly after the outbreak of the Great War and embarked for Belgium with the First Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders in March 1915. One month later he saw action in the Second Battle of Ypres where he was gassed in one of the first poison gas attacks ever launched by the Germans. After recovering from the gas and a subsequent bout of influenza his battalion was transported to Marseilles from where it embarked on a ship for Salonika in Greece. After two years in the mountainous wastelands to the north of Salonika, Alexander was wounded in action on 4th September 1918, suffering gunshot wounds to the neck, right shoulder and thigh. This was almost certainly the result of machine gun fire. After a month he was pronounced out of danger and transferred from Salonika to a hospital ship in the Mediterranean, the Glengorm Castle. After a spell in Malta he was invalided back to Scotland in early 1919.

In 1922, Alexander re-joined his battalion, signing up for four more years. In September of 1922 he married Isabella Rose at South Leith Manse, and on leaving the army lived once more in Leith at 3 Tennant Street. He went back to his pre-war job as a labourer at the Eastern Sawmills at the foot of Easter Road (now the site of Leith Academy Secondary School) . Alexander and Isabella had seven children. All except George survived into adulthood. George died at home on the 16th May 1930 having only lived for one month. His death certificate states the cause of death as "apparently congenital debility prematurity". He was buried in Rosebank Cemetery, Pilrig Street. His grandmother Jane Low and great-grandmother Jane Fraser are also buried there.

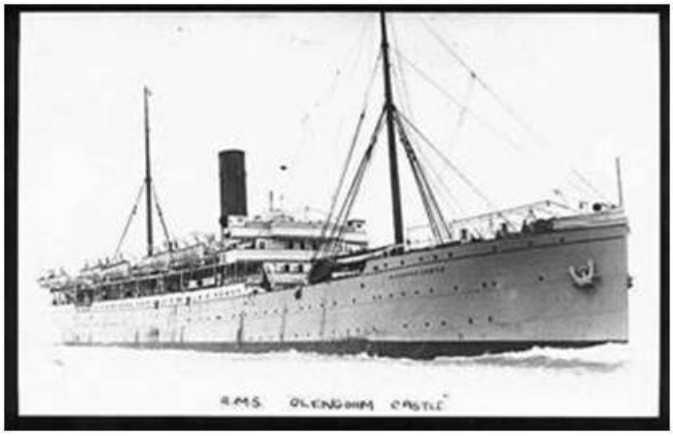
Alexander and Isabella remained at Tennant Street until 1965 when they were moved to a pensioner's council house at 48 Granton Crescent. Isabella died there on 2nd September that year. Alexander carried on the tradition of having his family round to see in each new year at Granton until he died of bronchopneumonia on May 28th 1973 in the City Hospital at Greenbank.



Trafalgar Lane, top right, late-19th Century. Alexander Shiels' birthplace is marked with a red "X"

Scottish soldiers at Ypres, 1915





Hospital ship "Glengorm Castle" where Alexander Shiels recoveredfrom his gunshot wounds in 1918



Two of Alexander's daughters: Ella (holding baby) and Millie, outsidethe stair at 3 Tennant Street. In the background is one of BonningtonRoad's five pubs, the Lothian Bar. The year is around 1955 and the baby is Millie's oldest daughter Margaret.



Four of Alexander's sons and daughters outside his house at Granton.
Back: Ella and Bobby. Front: Nan and Alex (c.early 1970s)



Alexander Shiels with daughter Ella.
Granton, around 1966

Alexander with granddaughter Diane Kent.
Granton, 1971

